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Eric Doeringer (ED)

Eric Doeringer is a Los Angeles–based conceptual artist. Doeringer began selling replicas of iconic artworks outside of galleries to the amusement, or more often the annoyance, of those inside. His practice follows closely on the heels of Elaine Sturtevant and Richard Prince as he challenges notions of authorship and originality through his oeuvre of knock-off books, paintings, sculptures, and installations. What becomes particularly interesting is the way Doeringer explores these ideas in the remix-ridden online world, where at times his copies become more "real" than the original. Interview by Ben Schwartz (BS).

BS: How has your understanding or appreciation of bootlegs evolved over time?

ED: One of the things that first intrigued me about "bootleg" or counterfeit merchandise was that a given item, say a Louis Vuitton handbag, would be reproduced at a variety of price points. At the top end, there's a bag of similar quality to the "real" thing (possibly manufactured at the same factory) but unauthorized. Then there's a range of cheaper knock-

offs that look convincing at a distance, but the leather and fasteners are chintzy and the stitching uneven. Finally, there's a copy that isn't trying very hard to look like the original (possibly to avoid legal action)—the LV is replaced by other initials and the bag's design is noticeably different. It was these "bottom tier" copies that captured my attention. At what point did they cease being "copies" and start becoming "originals?" The Monkees weren't The Beatles, but they still had some great songs!

Over time, I've grown more interested in exploring the relationship between the original and the copy. I've learned a lot about copyright law and become more adamant about artists' rights to appropriate, sample, remix, collage, and otherwise repurpose existing works.

> BS: In an interview about bootlegging, I'd like to "bootleg" a question from Robert Rosenblum in a 2003 interview with Mike Bidlo in *Artforum*: "What you do is close to what a lot of artists do: namely, making replicas of, or variations on, well-known works of 20th-century art. You could be grouped together with a predecessor like Elaine Sturtevant, who began doing this work in the 1960s, or with your contemporaries from the 1980s and 1990s like Sherrie Levine or Richard Pettibone. I'm curious to know how you feel about your relationship to these other artists."

ED: I definitely feel a kinship with these artists (I would include a few others like Richard Prince and Jonathan Monk). I think it's interesting that even

though we are all doing the "same" thing (i.e, "copying" other artists), we are very different artists with different concerns. We all look back to Warhol and Duchamp, but there's a world of difference between a Pettibone Warhol painting and a Sturtevant Warhol painting (and not just the scale!). We do share some commonalities, like an interest in the ways that repetition changes an image (and the reception of an image) and in challenging traditional notions of authorship and originality.

> BS: The art world tends to distinguish itself by labeling mimicry or "bootlegging" as "appropriation." Why do you think this is, and do you personally differentiate between these two ideas?

ED: I would say mimicry is the attempt to copy something perfectly. A mimic is judged on its fidelity to the original. A bootleg is a bad mimic—unauthorized and of lower quality. But, one could view the bootleg as simply "different" from the original, not necessarily "lesser." The slippage between the original and the bootleg provides an opportunity for creative change.

A bootleg is usually "cheap," which could be good or bad depending on your perspective. A bootleg might be available when the original is not—like bootleg liquor during prohibition, a bootleg recording of a live concert, or a bootleg copy of a banned or unreleased book or movie.

The language is complicated. I don't like to use the word "copy" in regards to my work, but it is often

pp. 360–361: Eric Doeringer's bootleg artworks for sale in the streets of New York, (2006)

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the easiest way to describe what I do. I don't mind the term "appropriation," which I define as repurposing an existing work (image, text, music, et cetera) to express a new idea.

> BS: For Sturtevant, it seems that the question of why she chose to bootleg certain works was often thought of as intuitive. How do you make that decision?

ED: For my Bootleg Series, the choice of artists was determined by their presence in the media and art market. I chose so-called "art stars." I definitely viewed the "curation" of artists, the "installation" of works on the street, and the "performance" of selling the paintings all to be parts of the "artwork."

The artists also had to have a recognizable style—you could say "brand"—that I could imitate relatively quickly and easily. The work had to look good and be "sellable." More Damien Hirst, less Marina Abramović.

When I sold my paintings on the street in Chelsea in the early 2000s, I thought of my selection of artists as a snapshot of the "hot" artists of the time—almost like a yearbook. In some ways, it *was* like bootlegging handbags. I could make a few copies of a few different paintings and see what sold on the street. If one painting proved to be popular, I'd make a bunch more. If another sold slowly, I would "discontinue" it and try something new.

More recently, I've done some thematic exhibitions of Bootleg paintings. I had a show based on works being auctioned at Christie's New York—my exhibition ran concurrently with the sale—and another in Los Angeles featuring works inspired by the

Broad Collection. For these series, I was able to "cherry pick" the works I thought were the strongest—and/or that I felt I could interpret the best—from predetermined collections of "masterpieces."

I also make works that I call "Recreations" which are more similar to the original works in scale, materials, and execution. These pieces are less about the market and more about the concepts explored in the original works. I'm drawn to artists who set up systems to generate their work (On Kawara's Date Paintings), relied on assistants to "make" their artwork (Sol LeWitt's Wall Drawings, Damien Hirst's Spot Paintings), or otherwise strove to remove their "hand" from their artwork (Andy Warhol's silkscreens, Ed Ruscha's photo books).

> BS: Bootlegging can be seen as an act of admiration or, conversely, as a form of subversion. In your practice, does your bootlegging stem from a place of fandom, or does it operate more as a critique?

ED: I definitely conceived the project as a subversion of the art market. Most obviously, I was trying to undercut the market by selling "cheap knockoffs." But, also, unlike traditional art multiples, my Bootlegs are neither signed—my name is rubber-stamped on the back—, numbered, nor issued in a limited quantity. And because the paintings are produced according to demand, I've made many more copies of the popular works, meaning the less "successful" paintings are "rarer" and thus potentially more valuable.

Selling my Bootlegs on the street in Chelsea was also a way to get around the gallery system, which had been daunting to me as a young artist. I liked that

vending my paintings on the street—perhaps the least prestigious way for an artist to exhibit their work—was integral to the project. Ironically, many more "important" people from the art world probably saw my paintings on the street than would have seen them inside a little-known "emerging artist" gallery.

I am also a lover—or "fan"—of art. My work involves a lot of research and studying artworks, and I wouldn't make it if I didn't love art and the art world. But I value both a critical eye and a sense of humor. You have to be able to laugh at yourself!

> BS: In 2019, you had a show almost exclusively of Christopher Wool Bootlegs. His work is predominately black and white, generally uses a particular stencil typeface... in a way, his work operates as a brand. A similar idea could be applied to other artists you bootleg, and of course, bootlegging and branding go hand-in-hand. I'm curious about your thoughts around this notion of an artist's practice as a brand? Is that an idea you are exploring in your work?

ED: The idea of artist-as-brand is definitely part of the concept behind my Bootleg series. The works I replicate have to be recognizable—"Oh, that's a Damien Hirst, that's a Warhol, that's a Richard Prince..." I am interested in the ways in which an artwork can function as a status symbol, and in what gives an artwork its value. An authentic Damien Hirst spot painting is worth more than mine, but my spot painting is more valuable than one made by an anonymous artist in China. They're all polka dots painted on white, and Damian didn't paint any of them. Why is Marcel Du-

champ's *Fountain*—itself a replica—worth so much more than a similar vintage urinal?

> BS: What is the importance of accuracy in your work? The pieces in your Bootleg series, you mention, are intentionally "bad" recreations of work. Your Art Recreations attempt to be as accurate to the original works as possible. Why is it important to make this distinction?

ED: To me, the word bootleg suggests a "bad" copy. But, something can be "so bad it's good" or "bad" in the sense of "badass." In my artwork, I use the term bootleg to describe a series of works that are produced relatively quickly so that they can be sold inexpensively. They are handmade multiples produced in small batches of the "same" work. They are not signed or numbered and are usually smaller in scale than the original works (I originally sold them on the street so they had to be portable, but the small scale also keeps my production costs low). The Recreations are made with more care. They are usually the same size as the original works and made using the same techniques and materials. But, of course, they are never identical to the original works.

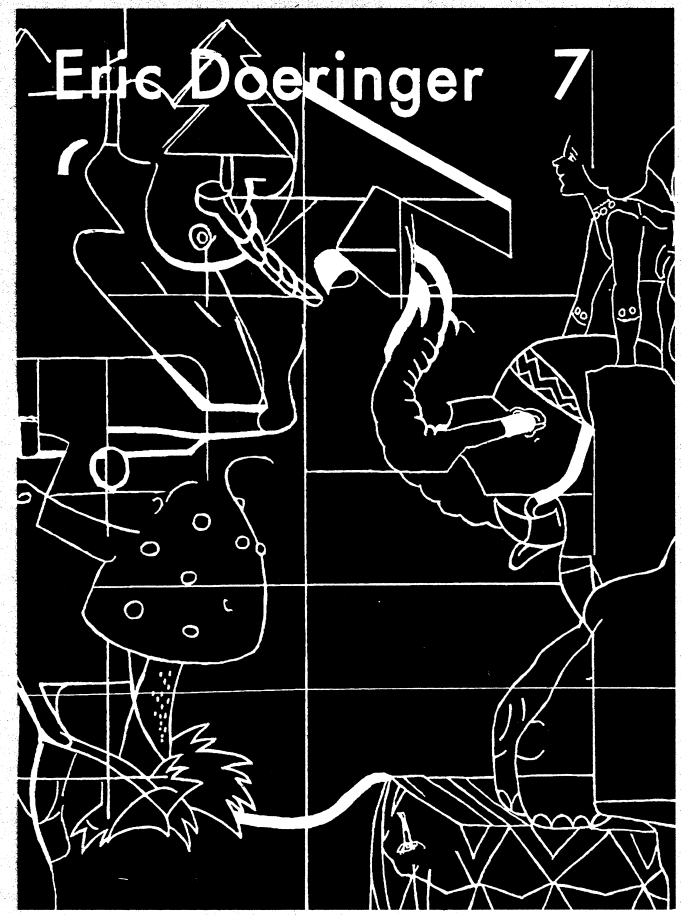
For me, that difference is the interesting part. It could be a vast difference, or what Duchamp called "infrathin." For example, my interpretation of Warhol's *Brillo Box* is a silkscreened plywood box mimicking the current design of a carton of Brillo pads. It looks nothing like Warhol's box (the logo and colors are completely different) but anyone familiar with Warhol will easily see the reference. At the opposite end of the spectrum are my recreations of Sol

LeWitt's Wall Drawings. If a museum were to exhibit an authentic, authorized LeWitt drawing of 10,000 straight 1-inch lines on one wall and my version of the same drawing on the opposite wall, they would be different (every line would be in a different place) but also the same (they would contain 10,000 lines in similar length, density, and area). It would be impossible to discern which was LeWitt's drawing and which was mine. Neither could be judged a "better" drawing. Yet the drawings hold different value (both monetary and historical) and, indeed, are two different artists' attempts to communicate different (if related) ideas.

> BS: I'm curious about your Bootleg books. I've noticed one major difference here is that you replace the artist's name with your own on the actual work. I'm interested in the ideas behind these more apparent alterations and the emphasis on authorship.

ED: I put my name on the cover and/or title page of the books because I am the author, and the original books included the author's name in the same place. I don't see that authorship as being more emphasized than in my other artwork, where my name is listed on a wall label or exhibition checklist, since that is how the original works would be presented. I always sign or otherwise mark my name on the back of works. For me, claiming authorship is the radical step—I would never attempt to pass my works off as works by the original artists.

p. 367: Eric Doeringer, *Gesammelte Werke Band 7 (after Dieter Roth)* (2020)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BS: What role does humor or irony play in your work? I'm thinking specifically here about your 2007 setup at the GEISAI Art Fair in Miami, or your experience having your Bootleg stand removed by police after a call from a gallerist in New York.

ED: Humor is very important. How can you participate in the art world and not want to laugh at it? When I sold my Bootleg paintings at the GEISAI Art Fair—which was held during Art Basel Miami Beach—I consciously tried to create an atmosphere that was closer to a 99-cent store than a high end art fair booth. The paintings were hung wall to wall with very little breathing room, I hung "used car lot" flags overhead, and I posted signs touting my low prices.

I think that when the art dealer called the cops on me, it was more about him than me. I hadn't "copied" any artists he represented, he just didn't like having vendors on the sidewalk. Most of the other dealers on the block were supportive, but it only takes one complaint. An artist actually threatened to sue me over an exhibition titled, 'FUCK EM IF THEY CAN'T TAKE A JOKE!'

I have received a number of "cease and desist" letters over the years from artists or their lawyers or galleries. This has actually become a real problem. I haven't ever been sued (I generally agree to cease and desist), but I have been asked to destroy (or, more commonly, forbidden to reproduce/exhibit/sell) some works. I have also lost exhibition and publication opportunities due to fears of legal action. I believe I should be able to make a painting of another artist's painting the same way I might make a paint-

ing of some flowers. But, I can't afford a legal fight against a millionaire...

> BS: What potency do you think bootlegging still has today, in the context of the internet and social media, where things are constantly reused, remixed, and reposted?

ED: I love how the internet and social media recontextualize images and create new "realities." I frequently come across images of my Bootleg paintings posted online as examples of the original artists' work. Once they are reproduced as jpegs, it's much harder to tell the difference between my little Bootleg paintings and the "real" ones.

I made a Bootleg "Julian Opie" painting, which is a self-portrait I drew in the style of Julian Opie. Some years later, I discovered a Russian website (selling reproductions of paintings printed on canvas) that was offering knockoffs of my painting as "Eric Doeringer by Julian Opie." Of course I had to buy one!

In fact, the rise of the internet and digital technology has turned pretty much everyone into a bootlegger. Who hasn't streamed a bit of unlicensed video from YouTube or uploaded a copyrighted image to Instagram? Once an image or other file is posted online, the author may legally retain copyright, but for all intents and purposes the work enters the public domain.

Title page (p. 356): Excerpt from Christopher Wool's *Untitled (P80) Helter Helter* (1988)